

A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women

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A Widening Sphere: Changing Roles of Victorian Women, edited by Martha Vicinus. Bloomington and London: Indiana University Press, 1977. pp. 326. \$15.00.

Inspired by the feminist movement, interest in the history of women has increased in the last decade. Some sympathetic historians, using what Mary S. Hartman calls the "male oppression model" (*Clio's Consciousness Raised* [New York: Harper, 1974], p. vii), have written the story of woman as a narrative of centuries of female bondage to male-oriented values. The popular image of the middle-class Victorian woman, perhaps more than any other, symbolizes such submission. Her uselessness and enforced idleness depict so graphically the tragedy of the wasted resources of womankind.

In reading *A Widening Sphere*, it becomes apparent that this stereotype, which has excited both our pity and our contempt, bears little resemblance to the daily lives of many Victorian women. As Martha Vicinus points out in her introduction (p. xi), historians have traditionally used popular magazines, advice or etiquette manuals, and female heroines in literature for details on the lives of Victorian women. Both manuals and novels have serious shortcomings as historical source material. Manuals are by nature prescriptive. They present an ideal to be attained, rather than a reflection of life as it is lived. The female characters created by Victorian authors, on the other hand, often represent an idealization of the female, not women as they were. Current historians, whose research is represented in *A Widening Sphere*, take a more critical look at this material, augmenting such data with demographic studies, which provides a more accurate picture of the life conditions of the Victorian woman.

This book is an expansion, and to some extent a correction of *Suffer and Be Still* (Bloomington: Indiana, 1972), an earlier book on Victorian women edited by Vicinus. As the title, *A Widening Sphere*, suggests, the Victorian woman did live, to some extent, in an age of expanding opportunities for women. The ten articles in this anthology deal with political and economic conditions that affected the lives of Victorian women, as well as with the more popular moral and social values of the day. Sheila Ryan Johansson, for example, looks at the life expectancy of Victorian women, and Lee Holcombe at the struggle to reform English property laws, which gave a husband complete control over his wife's person and possessions.

While a respectable marriage was the goal of most Victorian women, not all were able or willing to marry. Thus, Judith Walkowitz, A. James Hammeron, Rita McWilliams-Tullberg, and Christopher Kent explore the options available for women who remained single. The lower class woman who had to support herself was forced to choose between prostitution and menial labor. Prostitution precluded respectability, of course, but it was economically more profitable than shop work or domestic servitude. Emigration to Australia or New Zealand was a possibility for the "distressed gentlewoman," as was the theater. Although emigrating as a teacher or governess was socially acceptable, those delicately reared females who chose to leave

England found themselves ill-prepared for the hardships of life abroad. The actress, on the other hand, while not considered quite respectable, carried an aura of glamour, and was increasingly welcome in Victorian social circles. Upper class Victorian women were admitted to institutions of higher learning, but few of these educated women were able to find the employment for which they qualified.

Victorian sexuality remains a strong area of interest to present day historians. Carol Christ and Sally Mitchell re-evaluate the Victorian images of masculinity and femininity in the literature and popular magazines of the day, while F. Barry Smith takes a fresh look at Victorian sexual behavior, questioning the validity of the source material used to create the stereotype of the prudish Victorian. Part II of Barbara Kanner's excellent annotated bibliography on Victorian women completes the volume. (Part I of Kanner's work is included in *Suffer and Be Still*.)

Taken together, these articles show the Victorian female to be a complex and varied woman, with more options available than we have heretofore imagined. Yet, as Vicinus cautions, we must be careful not to replace stereotype with stereotype. The tenets of respectability and convention were ever-present in Victorian society—a burden to be borne if one submitted, or a force to be reckoned with if one rebelled. It must be remembered that the Victorian woman sketched by earlier historians is the model that the Victorians created for themselves. If that model was not an accurate reflection of women as they were, it did represent women as Victorian society wanted to believe that they were. The relationship between the ideal Victorian woman and the real Victorian woman will occupy historians for years to come.

—Phyllis M. Japp

University of Nebraska at Omaha

Black Ethos; Northern Urban Negro Life and Thought, 1890-1930, by David Gordon Nielson. West Port, Conn.: Greenwood Press, 1977. pp. xvii, 248. Bibliography, index. \$14.95.

During the 1890s, the few remaining black and white radicals, who attempted to create a democracy in the post-Civil War South, saw their last hopes extinguished by a counter-insurgency. As the southern states put the final touches to the system of segregation, the oppression which accompanied Jim Crow precipitated a great migration of southern blacks to the industrial cities of the North. Because blacks were forced into congested neighborhoods by racism, close physical proximity made it clear that they had a common plight and oppressor. The result was a heightened sense of "peoplehood" among black urbanites. It is the general thesis of Nielson's study that the period from 1890 to 1930 was particularly crucial in the development of a distinct Afro-American culture. Even though individual Negroes improved their

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